

Students' Demands and Expectations in an Age of Reduced Financial Support: the perspectives of lecturers in four English universities

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ABSTRACT *This paper uses qualitative data from interviews with university lecturers to explore the effects of changes in financial support on students' demands and expectations. Four main changes were identified: a higher proportion of students enter higher education for career reasons than in the past; students are more interested in vocational aspects of their courses than in academic study; they are less willing to undertake independent study and are more demanding of teaching staff's time. A further change was identified in the extent of part-time working by students which affects attendance and study.*

The replacement of maintenance grants with loans and introduction of fees were seen to have encouraged 'consumerist' attitudes towards higher education. Changes in attitudes and expectations were also explained with reference to the expansion of higher education. These had adverse effects on university lecturers, with implications for job satisfaction and for recruitment and retention.

Introduction

A series of changes in government policy have gradually shifted some of the costs of higher education in the UK to the student and their family. The main stages in this process were the gradual replacement of the maintenance grant by student loans during the 1990s, and the introduction of tuition fees in 1998. Quite legitimately the focus of the UK education media and research has been on the impact of these financial changes on participation (see, for example, Knowles, 2000; NUS, 2000), but the effects on students' demands and expectations have been given little consideration. Yet there are a number of ways in which the transfer of costs to students might be expected to change their demands of their university, and to change the experiences of teaching staff. One might expect concerns about future employment to be a key area of change, with the accumulation of debt increasing students' desire for provision that assists their future employment. The introduction of fees might be expected to change students' approach to education from that of a recipient of a free service to that of a consumer. Indeed, there have been reports of an increase in litigation by students (see Slapper, 1997), which might

be accelerated by fees. Universities may also see student demands on them change due to an increase in term-time working, which is recognised as having increased in the UK and elsewhere in recent years (see Ford *et al.*, 1995; Callender & Kemp, 2000; McInnis *et al.*, 2000).

If students' demands and expectations of university have been changing, this might be expected to be experienced directly by teaching staff. It is also possible that teaching staff may feel under a different obligation towards students which could affect what they do for them. This paper presents lecturers' views on students' attitudes and expectations using qualitative data from interviews with lecturers at four English universities. A total of 70 lecturers were interviewed, in four universities, between November 2000 and April 2001, selected from staff lists to include a range across subject areas and seniority². The four English universities were selected to typify universities with different status in the UK higher education market, measured by entry requirements. To preserve anonymity, the universities are referred to as University A, University B, University C and University D, respectively. Universities A and B are old universities, with high and low entry requirements, respectively, and Universities C and D are new universities,³ with high and low entry requirements, respectively. On a range of measures, University A would be seen as highest status, and University D as lowest status. The paper also draws on data from students surveyed in the four universities during 2000.⁴

Why Do Students Go to University?

Previous research in the UK has indicated a strong instrumental orientation in the decision to go to university, particularly the improvement of employment prospects (see Callender, 1997). Lecturers believed that this has become a stronger motivation in recent years. However, there was some disagreement about when this began and why. Some felt the increase in financial commitment was an important factor. However, a number felt that it is explained by the professionalisation of many occupations and degree-level entry to many careers.

Lecturers were concerned about the effects of this change in motivation on students' approach to their studies. A number of lecturers described students' approach to their university education as 'instrumental', and some felt that this encouraged students with little interest in academic study to go to university. As one lecturer with eight years of experience in university education remarked,

More people see it as the passport they need to a good job and that it's a relatively simple route. You do your degree and there's a job out there waiting for you. (B13)

Lecturers' views on the importance of future employment in students' orientation to higher education are borne out by data from our first survey of students which found employment prospects the most common reason for going into higher education and a strong consideration in choice of university and subject choice for about half of students (see Metcalf, 2001).

A number of lecturers were concerned at what they saw as a declining interest among students in the subject they study. Many believed that fewer students go to university out of interest in their subject than in previous years and those who do have an interest in the subject are less interested in theoretical aspects than students were in the past. These views are compatible with the findings of the student survey, which found interest in

further study in third place, behind employment prospects and others' expectations and advice (see Metcalf, 2001).

A number of lecturers referred to a decline in students who go to university for the student lifestyle, which might include active participation in social and political clubs. Evidence for this was cited in the increase in local students, who retain their pre-university social networks and activities rather than enter fully into student life. The trend in studying locally has been widely noted (see, for example, Coffield & Vignoles, 1997) and is particularly marked in new universities. Indeed, the student survey found that proximity to home was very important in university choice for 40% of students at University D, but for only 3% at University A. Local students were reported by lecturers to spend little time on campus, attending only for teaching sessions and participating little in the social and political life of the university. Although lecturers welcomed mature students and those who were restricted to studying locally, lecturers viewed the increase in studying locally among standard entry students as a negative development. This was because students still living at home were thought to participate less in student life and to diminish the 'student experience' and the university.

Many lecturers believed these changes in motivation—the decline in interest in academic study and student life, and increase in career considerations—were a result of the expansion of higher education during the 1980s and 1990s and the broadening of the intake to include lower achievers at secondary level. Although some students were seen to be strongly motivated by job prospects, lecturers also believed that many young people 'drift' into university, viewing it as a 'natural progression' rather than a definite choice. This second group were reported to be less concerned with grades. However, both groups were seen as less interested in academic study, and this was the key concern of many lecturers.

What Do Students Expect of a University Education? Lecturers identified two principal changes in students' expectations of a university education: an increased concern with degree class; and interest in vocational aspects of study. Many lecturers felt that the main concern of many students is to achieve a good class of degree. Employment considerations were thought to be behind this concern. Students at all four universities were widely reported to be more concerned and therefore more motivated than in the past by grades and degree class. Indeed, some lecturers felt that many students are motivated principally by assessment, as a lecturer in physics at University A reported:

I think that they are more driven in terms of assessment. They are interested in 'what do I need to do to pass this assessment', rather than 'what do I need to do to understand this bit of physics'. (A4)

It was also reported that some students choose modules in which they can score the highest marks, rather than those in which they have an interest. Some lecturers reported that this has led some students to adopt a more 'consumerist' approach, in wanting to be told what is required to achieve a good mark. Some lecturers felt that, as a consequence of students' heightened concern about their results, they were expected to deliver a different style of teaching, geared to 'training' students to achieve the highest possible marks. In terms of degree class, it was widely reported by lecturers in Universities A, B and C that students expect to gain a class 2.1 degree at least, or feel they have failed. A 2.1 was therefore seen as the 'gold standard', partly because of the competitive market for graduates. A number remarked that students' expectations are high and sometimes unrealistic. As one lecturer remarked,

There now seems to be an expectation that ... whatever they do, unless it is horrendously bad, a 2:1 mark will result at the end of it whatever happens. (A11)

A number of lecturers in all four universities commented that students watch their grades assiduously in order to check they are on target for the degree class they want. Some lecturers felt that this attitude had been encouraged by the modular system in which students gradually accrue marks from an early stage and obtain regular feedback. Therefore, the frequent provision of information on grades was thought to promote interest and fuel anxiety, which leads to dissatisfaction and grievance.

Interest in a Vocational Education

Lecturers in all four universities felt that students want a more vocational education, to gain skills that will enhance job prospects. This was felt especially strongly by some lecturers at University B, who had found expectations among some students for a vocational course that would equip them with specific skills. Interest in theoretical aspects of study was reported to be unusual. Although this was most commonly reported by lecturers in subjects with a vocational slant, for example, computing, it was also reported by lecturers in more mainstream academic subjects. For example, a lecturer in economics, when discussing students' preferences in course modules, stated,

They increasingly find economics too theoretical and prefer to go for more applied, career-oriented subjects like finance and accounting rather than pure economics. (B6)

In some subjects, for example, law, students were reported to select modules that would make them more attractive to employers. Some lecturers viewed this development with some concern, as a lecturer in business and management at University B, complained:

It is even beyond instrumentalism in that it isn't 'I could be skilled at this and therefore I could be great at that'; it's 'I'll have a good CV.' (B13)

Some lecturers felt that the emphasis on vocational relevance did not come from students alone, but was to some extent encouraged by the concern of the university to improve employment of graduates, particularly in view of the introduction of such a measure in the performance indicators. Departments wished to improve the employability of graduates by meeting employers' skill needs. These were both vocational skills and core skills in such areas as team working and communications. As a lecturer in physics at University A remarked,

Our approach was to go to graduate employers and say to them 'what are you not currently getting from physics graduates that you think that we can put into the course' and we have responded fairly heavily to that, built our fourth year around *skills development*, *group working* and that sort of stuff. (A4)

There was some difference in the views of lecturers at old and new universities, with those at the former polytechnics finding students' preferences for a vocational orientation more acceptable than did their counterparts at the old universities because of the traditional emphasis in UK polytechnics on vocational skills and outcomes in provision.

Do Students Want More Contact with Lecturers?

One might expect that an increase in costs of higher education for students would result in demands for more teaching, through an increase in provision of lectures, tutorials and individual contact time. However, most lecturers felt there has been no change in students' demands for the amount of teaching and other contact in recent years, particularly through provision of lectures and tutorials. However, a small number of lecturers at each university said that some students make more demands for individual contact with teaching staff than in the past, asking tutors to explain areas of work with which they experience difficulty and wanting more feedback and discussion of their results. Some lecturers felt that the increased demand for individual contact came largely from students of lower ability, who had increased in number in recent years (see above). A number commented that some students expect instant help and do not appreciate that teaching staff have other work responsibilities apart from teaching, as a lecturer at University D remarked:

An increasing number almost expect you to drop everything for them when they want it. It is more a case that they have got an issue and they want you to deal with it then and there, rather than realise that you have other work to do. (D11)

Some lecturers admitted spending more time working at home in order to evade students' attentions.

Lecturers felt that students want more direction and guidance than in the past, particularly over what knowledge they are expected to acquire, and to demonstrate that they have acquired, for assessment. Students were reported to want more 'prescribed' teaching, delivering the required knowledge, rather than to do their own reading and research. As a lecturer in music at University A explained,

Ten years ago we would have pointed the students in the direction of certain books and articles that we would expect them to read. Today it is assumed that you will provide the students with all the details of all they need to know, that you will provide them with book references, page, references, chapter references, and that all of this will be laid out before the student even begins the module. (A11)

Lecturers gave three explanations for this development: firstly some lecturers referred to the concern with grades (see above), students' concerns being centred on how they could achieve a good mark for a piece of work; secondly, it was seen as a result of a lowering in the ability of the intake (see above), although not at University A. A third explanation was the style of teaching and learning typically used in schools at 'A' level, and in newer vocational provision. This was seen to 'spoon-feed' students rather than require independent study, and to inadequately prepare students for higher education. As a lecturer with 13 years' teaching experience at University C stated in relation to 'A' levels,

They get a tremendous amount of input from teachers and they expect that when they come to university. I don't think that used to be the case as much as it is now. (C17)

The extent to which lecturers based their beliefs about sixth-form teaching methods is not clear. Bradford (1996) argues that such beliefs are largely based on speculation, since, despite major changes in secondary and higher education during the 1980s and 1990s, 'few people working within either sector have been involved in, or are very aware of, the changes in the other' (1996, p. 130). According to Bradford, university lecturers have less

involvement in such activities as 'A' level examining and writing of texts than in the past. However, the view that secondary school teaching equips students poorly for independent study is a widely held view among university teachers. The transition from school to university is an issue that has not received much attention in UK policy, compared with countries such as Australia (see McInnis *et al.*, 2000).

What Do Students Expect of Their Lectures?

A large number of lecturers reported an increased demand for handouts, lecture notes and other materials. Some stated that students now expect these, and rely heavily on their use rather than materials that they obtain themselves. As a lecturer in law at University A stated,

There is a growing expectation that we will provide *all* materials. I have had a few students this year saying 'You are giving us lecture handouts but you are then expecting us to read legal cases and you haven't photocopied those for us.'
(A9)

Students were reported to protest if lecture handouts are not provided. As a lecturer in maths at University D explained, 'They expect handouts; you get lynched if you don't provide handouts' (D13).

Lecturers also received requests to make notes available on the university website; through personal email from the lecturer to the student; or in advance of the lecture. Lecturers responded very differently to such requests, but very few resisted pressure from students and gave no lecture notes at all. However, many lecturers were concerned that distributing lecture notes on the internet encouraged a poor approach to learning, as a lecturer at University C stated:

If students are accessing learning materials electronically, are they adequately supported? Is that the same as coming along to the lecture and engaging with the tutor. Is it the same as having opportunities to discuss with peers, for example? (C2)

Lecturers gave a number of explanations for the increased demand from students for materials, including the influence of schools' teaching (see above) and part-time working by students. Some lecturers, particularly at the two new universities, believed that the increased demand for 'off the shelf' materials resulted partly from part-time working that caused students to miss lectures (see below). The cost of buying books was also thought to be a factor, as was the difficulty of borrowing books from university libraries, given the expansion in student numbers and high demand for key texts.

A number of lecturers said that students have higher expectations of lectures than in the past, wanting a more 'lively' or entertaining presentation. As one lecturer in civil engineering at University A reported,

Yes. They like colour and they have extremely low attention thresholds. ... When they get bored they have absolutely no qualms about showing it. Maintaining their attention has become more difficult. They like to be indulged. They don't like taking notes—they are not good at taking notes, they have lost that skill. (A14)

These changes in student expectations were seen to some extent as a result of moves to improve the quality of teaching rather than a result of any demands by students. Pressure from the National Quality Assurance Agency was believed to be a particularly strong

influence. They were also seen to come from lecturers themselves, keen to improve the quality of their delivery through using new tools.

Part-Time Working

Lecturers were aware that many students work part-time, and believed that the extent of part-time working has grown alongside the decline in student support. The exception were lecturers at University A, who believed that few of their students worked part-time. Some explained this with reference to the affluent background of many of their intake, as a lecturer in French explained:

Many of our students are from private [fee-paying] schools or grant maintained, and they have mobile phones and cars. (A1)

Lecturers' beliefs about the extent of part-time working during term time were reasonably accurate: the student survey found that only 27% of students at University A worked during term time, compared with more than half of students at the other three universities (see Metcalf, 2001). At University D, 40% of students said they worked every week, which is also indicative of differences in part-time working by social class.

The main effects of part-time working at universities were reported as poor attendance, late arrival, early leaving, and late submissions of work. Tiredness, illness and depression were seen to sometimes result from working excessive or unsocial hours. Part-time working was also reported to affect choice of courses where students' hours of part-time work clashed with course timetables. A number of lecturers reported that students were less flexible about the timing of teaching sessions, as a Course Leader in health studies explained:

Students are constantly asking to change their seminar groups because it does not fit in with their work commitments ... it never used to be as bad as it is now. (C17)

Lecturers in University D remarked on the changing patterns of attendance by some students. Some were reported to attend university only for timetabled sessions, which was believed to diminish the student experience for themselves and for others. A Senior Lecturer in politics compared his own experience as a student with that of those he was teaching:

The student experience is changing. When I think back to my own time at university, sitting in canteens and talking to my colleagues ... that aspect of student life is suffering. They're coming on to campus at the times they aren't working, picking up materials, doing what they need to do and going off again and not immersing themselves in student life. (D6)

The extent of part-time working was reported to be relatively recent. However, with the exception of University A, lecturers appeared to be treating part-time working as part of student life, for example by accepting non-attendance and even late submission of work. This was possibly a result of pressure from students who impressed on teaching staff their need to earn money. Therefore, while some lecturers issued guidelines on the number of study hours or advised against working, they reluctantly accepted that these were of little influence. As a Course Leader in health studies at University C stated,

They expect their work commitments to be taken into consideration. They are up-front about it. They say 'I can't do that, I'm working.' They have got to work and they know that we know that they have to pay their own fees and

have to work to do it. So they assume that because they have got to work we should take that into consideration. (C17)

Whilst in the past this working not have been accepted as a valid excuse for late submission of work, lecturers have interpreted rules on mitigating circumstances to include part-time working because they were sympathetic to students' situation. As a lecturer at University D explained,

Three years ago we could say 'look your assignment's not in on time', they'd say 'it's because I'm working full-time' and we could say 'you're on a full-time degree course you shouldn't be working full-time'. We are now not in a position to do that because we realise that students would starve unless they worked. (D13)

Fees and Consumerism

Many lecturers believed there is no link between the changes they identified in students' attitudes and the introduction of tuition fees in 1998. However, some lecturers believed that fees have given further encouragement to a consumerist attitude, which they believed began with the introduction of loans and the increasing cost of higher education to students. Lecturers gave a number of examples of such a change in attitude among students:

- Paying fees confers the right to a degree.
- The university should provide 'value for money' in its courses and other provision.
- Lecture notes and other materials are 'products' of the course and are covered by fee payments.
- Lecturers should be readily available to provide assistance to students.

Although some lecturers felt that fees have played a role in encouraging such attitudes among students, a number remarked that students of parents with lower income are not required to pay fees. Others felt that this was not relevant because the 'culture' of fees was found to pervade relations between the university and the student body. Other lecturers felt their university had itself promoted the view of the student as a consumer of higher education, sometimes in order to emphasise the quality of provision to attract applicants. For example, some lecturers remarked that a 'contract' had effectively been drawn up between the university and students through course details published in handbooks and other university documents. Some lecturers felt that the availability of such detailed information on course content and the standards required can only encourage a narrow focus on grades and degree class. However, many lecturers welcomed this development, feeling that it clarified what students might expect from the university. A few even welcomed what is widely seen as students' new 'customer' status, as two lecturers explained:

We are increasingly seeing them as customers and as customers we should be giving them a good service, which, again, I think is a good thing. (B6)

I do find myself saying to them that if they want to come and see me, that is part of what I am paid for; they are customers and they have rights. (C7)

Some lecturers said that they were themselves very conscious that most students incur debt by going to university, and that this made them concerned to provide students with

value for money. As one lecturer explained, 'I feel I have to deliver something good because of the financial sacrifice they are making' (C3).

Lecturers reported an increase in student complaints, although the majority of these were informal, as in the past, and about marks. Some lecturers felt that students had been encouraged to become more 'disputacious', including by the university itself. As one lecturer explained,

We have seen a rise in the number of students who are challenging marks. This may be related to the consumer culture and I can't think of what would explain it other than fees. There has been a change in the ethos of the university towards treating students as customers. (D6)

As Murlis and Harlte (1996) remark, in this respect, universities are increasingly similar to private companies. However, many lecturers expressed doubt that tuition fees were a factor in this increase, so that while a small number of lecturers felt that fees encouraged complaints, others felt that fees were used as a 'lever' by students to argue for better provision, or were a factor in their department's more conciliatory attitude.

Lecturer's Views on the Changes, and Effects on Their Work

A number of questions arise from these findings: How did lecturers feel about the changes they identified? Was their own work affected, and in what ways? First, what did they think about the changes they identified in students' motivations? Many lecturers expressed disappointment that present-day students at their universities seem to be less interested in their chosen degree subject than in the past. For some lecturers, this devalued the experience of university lecturing. As two lecturers at University A remarked,

You feel as if you are being treated as the lecturer providing them with lecture notes which they'll take down to try remember how to answer exam questions, rather than someone who is trying to convey a love of the subject or an interest in the subject. ... Students want a degree and not an education. (A8).

It has made me a lot more cynical about students, which is a bad thing. ... Studying is seen as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. (A1)

A number of lecturers said that, as a result of these changes, they were now less interested in teaching than in the past and gained more satisfaction from other areas of their work, such as research. Some lecturers expressed concern for other students as well as for their own job satisfaction, believing that the experience of university for more academic students had deteriorated. Few lecturers said they did anything differently as a result of the introduction of fees. Some said they provided more detailed information and feedback about students' work but that this was not only because students were paying, but because of quality control measures and concern about Quality Assurance assessment.

Few lecturers felt their role had changed in recent years, but those who did usually cited students' views of them as 'teachers' and students' expectations of high levels of contact and good grades. In this context, some referred to 'consumerism' (see above). However, it was generally thought that, where relationships had changed, that this was a result of a number of factors, which included cuts in the funding per student, the expansion in student numbers and a change in the student intake. The ratio of students

to staff at UK universities has greatly increased in recent years, from 9:1 in 1990 to 17:1 in 1998 (see Greenaway & Haynes, 2000) and was even higher at two of the case study universities. The greater pressure on lecturers, resulting from larger class sizes and demands from individual students, has been widely reported in the UK higher education media and by academic research (Keep *et al.*, 1996) and was certainly part of the daily experiences of the lecturers interviewed. For some, this resulted in less time to undertake research, a consequence of higher student numbers noted by Keep *et al.* (1996, p. 35).

Conclusions

The qualitative research on which this paper is based was conducted to explore the views of university lecturers' on the impact of tuition fees on students' demands and expectations of a university education. Some differences were found between lecturers. For example, those with more years of experience remarked more often on students' vocational orientation and unwillingness to study independently; and those in the highly rated old university, or teaching on courses with high entry requirements, were less likely to refer to students' declining academic interest or ability. Lecturers in the four universities also had different experiences of part-time working by students and its affects. However, despite these differences, four main changes in students' attitudes and expectations of university were identified:

- A higher proportion of current students in the UK go to university for career reasons than in the past.
- Today's students are less interested in their subject and are more interested in vocational aspects of their studies.
- Students are less able or willing to undertake independent study than they were ten or more years ago, and expect more instruction and guidance from teaching staff.
- Lecturers in three of the universities believed that part-time working is increasingly common among their students and has a detrimental effect on their studies.

These changes have a number of adverse effects on lecturers. Many expressed disappointment that today's students are less interested in their degree subject than in the past. For some lecturers, this has devalued the experience of university lecturing. A number with many years of teaching experience said that they were now less interested in teaching than in the past and gained more satisfaction from other areas of their work, such as research.

What did lecturers feel had caused the changes they identified in students' expectations and demands? Few felt that changes in funding, including tuition fees, played a major role. The main influence was seen as the expansion of higher education in the UK, which had brought in students with different attitudes and expectations. The principal change was in the proportion of students who attend university simply to gain a degree. Lecturers believed that the intake of students had undergone a significant change as instrumentalism took the place of academic interest as a key motivator. Many lecturers also believed that today's intake includes a higher proportion of students of lower ability.

The findings of the research have implications for the job satisfaction of university lecturers and therefore for recruitment and retention. Changes in students' demands and expectations have come on top of other changes to universities and the work of university lecturers in the UK. In the case study universities these included mergers with other institutions, closure of university sites, courses and departments, and redundancies among teaching staff. The individuals interviewed also felt subjected to far more scrutiny than

in the past, in relation to their teaching and the service provided to students, through the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency and in their research output through the Research Assessment Exercise. It was apparent that many interviewees found aspects of their job stressful. Tuition fees contributed to this stress in a number of ways, including the following:

- Concern to provide value for money to students, including through providing lecture notes, handouts and photocopies of key texts.
- Being available to students at times convenient to them and responding to requests for help through written messages and email.
- Concern about loss of students to 'vocational' courses and feeling pressure to emphasise the vocational relevance of modules and courses.

The most concrete effect of fees was felt in the growth of part-time working by students. Lecturers felt that part-time working has a detrimental effect on student performance and themselves felt under increasing pressure to make allowances for students unable to attend sessions or complete work to deadlines because of part-time working.

Lecturers also raised a number of other concerns about tuition fees. A number of lecturers at University A remarked that the proportion of students from working-class backgrounds had shrunk to insignificant levels in recent years, and were concerned that such students were discouraged on financial grounds or through 'debt aversion' (see Callender & Kemp, 2000; Knowles, 2000). Concerns were also expressed about the perceived decline in mature student numbers across all four universities.

The research therefore found lecturers to be dissatisfied with many aspects of their job, as a result of changes in students' attitudes and expectations. While fees and other changes in financial support were not considered responsible in themselves for most of the changes identified, they were believed to accelerate some existing trends, particularly by lending legitimacy to students' views of the student/university relationship as one of customer and provider and to encourage part-time working among students. As a consequence, the experience of students was seen as diminished, as well as the job of the university lecturer.

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NOTES

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2. Lecturers had an average of 13 years experience of working in British universities.
3. Before 1992 these universities were 'polytechnics' but were merged with universities to form one sector.
4. Responses were obtained from 782 students across the four universities.

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